Stephen Foster

Remediating Curtis Imagining Indigeneity

Portrait of a Sioux Medicine Man, 2013

April 11 to June 14, 2015

surrey
art gallery

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1975-2015

In *Remediating Curtis: Imagining Indigeneity*, Stephen Foster explores the legacy of the film and photographic work of ethnographer Edward S. Curtis (1868-1952), famous for his depictions of First Nations in the early 1900s, and his influence on popular images of 'Indianness' in contemporary culture. The wide-spread distribution of Curtis' photographs in the 1920s and 30s, and later in the 1960s and 70s, and circulation of his film *In the Land of the Head Hunters* helped to perpetuate a concept of a singular North American 'Indian' which persists in popular culture to this day, defying the reality of the diversity of indigenous cultures in North America.

Installed in the TechLab, Foster's interactive video installation *Remediating Curtis: Remix2*, 2015 presents a video mash-up, in which scenes from Curtis's 1914 silent film *In the Land of the Head Hunters* are combined with excerpts from Hollywood films. The central image in the video is an animated reconstruction of an original set and characters in the Curtis film. The audience controls (remixes) the sound and video elements through their interactions with figurines, tracked by a computer through sensors, to remix the video projections.

In the adjoining Gallery space, are works from Foster's 2013 photographic series, *Toy Portraits*. These 3D backlit prints document toy Indian figurines in the style of Curtis's pictorialist portraits which foregrounded beauty, tonality, and composition rather than the documentation of reality. Foster presents these figurines at heroic scale, connecting Curtis' images with current representations of indigeneity which can be found in children's toys, tourist shops, blockbuster films and advertising.

Foster's work references the immersive experiences common in the film industry's obsession with 3D movies like *Avatar*, while also adding a kind of nostalgia for 50s cinematic pop culture. Additionally, his work invites the viewer to question why this romantic construction of the 'imaginary Indian' remains so resilient into the 21st century.

This is the third in a series of exhibitions that the Surrey Art Gallery has presented in which artists have explored 3D technologies and their relationship to contemporary culture. The previous projects were Sylvia Grace Borda's *Field Studies*, 2013 and Ali Kazimi's *Fair Play*, 2014.We are very pleased to have the opportunity to showcase Stephen Foster's exploration of 3D and interactive technologies, as well as his critical research into issues of cultural identity of Canada's indigenous peoples.

Brian Foreman
Assistant Curator

In the Land of The Headhunters: Potlatch Dancers, 2013

In Remediating Curtis

In *Remediating Curtis: Imagining Indigeneity,* multi-media artist Stephen Foster intermixes past and present, through content and technology, in order to raise important questions about one's state of participation in maintaining or revising representations of indigeneity. What is the responsibility of the viewer? To be a passive consumer of images and age-old tales of a dying race that flash by, or to take into due consideration how one's body has the capacity to activate new storylines and become the site for re-examining long held historical presumptions?

Remediating Curtis compels a deeper commitment. Foster first investigated the ethical and cultural ambivalences contained within Edward Curtis' photographic and filmic representations of indigenous cultures during the course of completing his Masters in Fine Arts at York University in the mid-1990s. Since then, Foster has moved from contemplating the personal impact that Curtis' representations have had in shaping his own sense of cultural identity as Haida-European Métis to reflecting both politically and technologically upon the influence that Curtis has had in art, ethnography, and popular culture.

At the turn of the 20th century, Curtis was at the cutting edge between art and science, developing great technological skill in capturing what he expected would soon be fading memories of peoples who lived across the land prior to European contact. Highly staged and culturally inaccurate, Curtis' documentations nonetheless brought into the public some imaginary aspects of indigenous lives, such as the potlatch, which were otherwise banned in

deliberate and concerted efforts to erase all traces of indigenous practices in European-settled territories. Although it might be an exaggeration to call Curtis' efforts heroic, his ever-vacillating moral reputation has given him a sense of immortality. The endurance of his work stems not only from the notoriety borne out of misrepresentations and conflations of many indigenous communities, but arises too from mastering photography and toying with film-making as means to contrive certain stories, determine certain truths.

As with many other indigenous artists, Foster is philosophical of his own remediative relationship to Curtis and, further, in re-imagining the cultural and technological means through which people come into contact with one another. However, he asks that the audience take several leaps and risks alongside him to experience the multi-dimensionality of reconstructing their own relationship to history. In mixing old and new media - 3D glasses juxtaposed with motion-sensored narrative streaming - Foster deftly blends the viewer's embodied memories of 1960s 'cowboy and indian' kitsch with the discombobulating sensations of cutting across and shaping compounded images of indigenous representations that have spanned popular culture in the past century. By doing so, he demonstrates how the viewer is not simply an empty vessel waiting to be filled up with stories of the past. Instead, the audience can actively intervene, and come to question critically stereotypical and racist conceptions of indigenous identity that perennially recycle through popular forms. Foster seems to suggest that perhaps each of us do not differ from Edward Curtis after all. Yet, from this point in history, we have the opportunity to confront our society's disturbing pasts and the audacity to find innovative ways of investigating our current surroundings. These attempts, while imperfect, contain possibilities for reimagining futures that generate mutually respectful engagements and ever-shifting occasions to remediate old and new relationships.

Ayumi Goto

Artist Statement

The post-colonial context of popular culture conceptualizes and perpetuates a simulacrum of 'indigeneity.' Through personal narratives, self-portraiture, and imagery rooted in my own experience as an artist of mixed European and Indigenous heritage, I engage in a practice of deconstructing images of 'Indianess' within the dominant culture. My work seeks to complicate, shift, and contradict these representations of 'Indianess', providing a more complex perspective, facilitating an alternative view of contemporary cultural and social issues. The work is not meant to present a sole indigenous perspective, but to express the reality of a multi-cultural hybrid legacy in an era heavily influenced by a not-too-distant colonial past – a past in which old stereotypes and concepts of 'indigeneity' underline a contemporary aesthetic within popular culture.

Using video, sound, and digital photomontage, I create images and multi-layered installation environments that explore the colonial legacy entrenched in mass-media culture. Drawing on a wide range of cultural and media sources, I create multi-layered inter-textual references that deconstruct myth and doctrine. By using electronic media and traditional media, I engage in a wider political discourse related to the influence of mass media on our perceptions and understanding of history and world issues. Within this framework I thematically focus on the issues of nation building and the complexities and contradictions involved in the imagining of artificial communities. Often this process mirrors the issues faced by the exploration of hybridized identity itself, both on the personal and political levels.

Stephen Foster

About the Artist

Stephen Foster is a digital media artist and researcher of mixed Haida and European background. His work deals with issues of Indigenous representation in popular culture through personal narrative. He has been exhibited both internationally and nationally; he has participated in various festivals with multi-channel video installations, interactive video installations and single channel video works.

Stephen Foster is the MFA Coordinator for the Department of Creative Studies and Acting Director of the Summer Institute for Interdisciplinary Indigenous Graduate Studies at the University of British Columbia, Okanagan Campus. Stephen is an Associate Professor in the Creative Studies Dept. where he instructs courses dedicated to video production, digital media and visual and cultural theory.

Checklist of Works:

In the Land of The Headhunters:
Potlatch Dancers, **2013**
inkjet print for backlit light box
courtesy of the artist
(reproduced on page 4)

Vanishing Race, **2013**
inkjet print for backlit light box
courtesy of the artist

Portrait of a Sioux Medicine Man, **2013**
inkjet print for backlit light box
courtesy of the artist
(reproduced on cover)

Portrait of a Sioux Chief, **2013**
inkjet print for backlit light box
courtesy of the artist

Portrait of a Sioux Scout, **2013**
inkjet print for backlit light box
courtesy of the artist

Rider in the Wilderness, **2013**
inkjet print for backlit light box
courtesy of the artist

Re-Mediating Curtis: Remix2, **2015**
multi-projector interactive video installation
courtesy of the artist

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Surrey Art Gallery's TechLab is a venue
and a program that supports the
production and presentation of digital art.

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